Press Photography and Visual Framing of News

Ilija Tomanić Trivundža
Ljubljana 2015
PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL FRAMING OF NEWS

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To Dragana, and to the other two girls of my life
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INTRODUCTION

In 1920, the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly V. Lunacharsky reportedly remarked, “besides his pocket watch, every progressive Soviet citizen must also own a camera.” Browsing for the original quotation on the screen of a present-day smartphone, it is hard not to muse over the prophetic dimension of his proclamation, just as it is difficult to overlook the somewhat over-optimistic underlying aspirations that presupposed a causal relationship between new image-making technologies and social progress. But in the age of “ubiquitous photography” (Hand 2012) and “mediated mass self-communication” (Castells 2009), Lunacharsky’s proposition is more than an amusing find in the intellectual flea market of the internet, and it bears more than an anecdotal connection to the debates on the status of the citizen (photo)journalist and the role of the photographic image in contemporary visual culture. Lunacharsky’s selection of citizens’ two must-have items of the industrial age connects the apparatus of visual perception with the very apparatus that, as Georg Simmel ([1903] 2002) noted, enables the co-ordination of activities and thus the circulation of goods in a capitalist society. By positioning the active citizen between visual production of knowledge and circulation of commodities, Lunacharsky implicates, however inadvertently, photography’s complex relationship with the social order. Photographs are not simply images or representations, they are also outcomes of various power-knowledge practices and material objects that not only circulate within society, but also significantly contribute to the circulation of other goods, knowledge and political power.

This introductory bravoure comes from an article titled *Tyranny of the Empty Frame: Reluctance to use citizen-produced photographs in online journalism* which I co-authored with my colleague Igor Vobič, and in which we studied a particularly frustrating problem for online journalists – newworkers with
Bo država cenzurirala svetovni splet?

Dostop do tujih spletnih igeralnic bi ministrstvo za finance omejilo z zakonom

VWHO

pripriavljeni na neodvisno oceno

V Kopensu svarijo pred vodo iz avtomatov

Na ZZV Koper so povsem po naključju ugotovili, da je voda, ki priteče iz avtomatov, precej slabša od tiste iz vodovoda

Metro Regija

Ljubljana - Predsednik vlade Bruselj je opominul nad razvojem in izjavnim okoljučnem ministru Karte Erjavec (sažemal za tebe - ne glede na to, ali bi se imel kandidata za novega ministra - predhodne same za teden predlagaj njegovo razstavitev. Erjavec, ki ga vsebine niso na mogočnem položaju, tu je vendar izpričal se, da je danes rečen izredno, dokler gre za zanesljivost pri začetku tega prejema, pa so v zgledu s takšnimi posami razvijali svoje oblike. Tudi slovenski strokovnjaki opozarjajo, da so na video dobro

Pahorju je prekipelo, Erjavčev razreštev naj bi parlamentu predlagal še ta teden

V DeSUS zatrjujejo, da bodo ne glede na vse ostale v koaliciji

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Tejana Tanacković

Koper - Na Zavodu za zdravstveno varstvo (ZZV) Koper pozirajo ljudi, naj ne pijejo vode iz avtomatov, ker je ta bistveno slabša kot tista, ki priteče iz javnega vodovoda. «Če bi takšna voda, kot teče iz teh avtomatov, obljuba in jasna vodovoda, bi zdravstvena inšpekcija preprečila njeno uporabo,» pravijo na ZZV Koper. Tam so povsem po naključju odkrili, da je voda, ki priteče iz avtomatov, bistveno slabša in ne odporjava vodni znesek.

Pahorju je prekipelo, Erjavčev razrešitev naj bi parlamentu predlagal še ta teden

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little or no training or experience in photojournalism – in online departments of the two leading Slovenian newspapers, Delo and Dnevnik, who are required to equip each news item with at least one photograph. We named this frustration "the tyranny of the empty frame". It seems befitting to start the book on visual framing of news with a reference to this example since it is in my opinion emblematic for the ambivalent status of photography within journalism and raises important questions about visual representation of news through photographic images. The ambivalent status of images within journalism is marked by simultaneous belief in their power and marginality. On the one hand, images are perceived to be one of constitutive elements of contemporary news reporting. In the case of the two Slovene newspapers, the necessity to publish at least one photograph per news item is hardcoded into the software of the platforms they are using to create and publish online news. They technically cannot publish a news item without a photograph. On the other hand however, the newsworkers in question have received no special training in how to select or edit photographs (as one of the informants put it: "'[The] online journalist who introduced me to working habits only said that I should not cut the [person’s] head off.'" (in Vobič and Tomanič Trivundža 2015: 509)) and have very limited image resources, such as photo feeds and archives. Often they would perceive news photographs as annoying problems that they need to solve quickly in order to meet deadline requirements. As another informant put it "'There are times when I say f***, the article will get outdated by the time I manage to find the photo...'" (in Vobič and Tomanič Trivundža 2015: 509)

In the described case, the news images are seen by the two media outlets both as being of paramount importance to journalism (no news without images) as well as ornamental (poor training, lack of image resources). Such ambivalent and contradictory relation to images is of course not only particular to (Slovene) journalism. Rather, as Mitchell has reminded us in his provocative essay (and later a book) titled What Do Pictures Want?, this dual consciousness about the power of images and the simultaneous belief in their insignificance, the fear of and contempt towards images is a general trait of contemporary societies and has a long cultural history. This history is tied to the division between rationality and emotionality (or in discourse studies vocabulary – is one of the instances of constituting this division) in which images are continuously tied to the domain of the irrational. The fear

Figure 1: Photographless newspaper, printed in 2010 for the Association of Slovene Photojournalists Enooki. The action aimed at demonstrating the importance of images in news reporting and at alerting the public to the underprivileged status of photojournalists in Slovene media. Simultaneously, it was also a part of a humanitarian campaign to raise funds for blind children.
of the power of images is the fear of the possibility of the loss of rational control or interfering with rational judgement, which, as will be shown in chapter 3, is also implied in the perceived effects of visual framing. The articulations of this simultaneous fear of and contempt towards images via rationality can in various forms be found in Modernity’s infatuation with positivism, in Enlightenment’s investment in the laboratory potential of reason, Ancient Greek philosophy (e.g. Plato’s critique of false images) or in aniconistic underpinning of the three “religions of the book” which define idolatry as sinful and attribute higher moral value to abstinence from the use and worshipping of images. Being delegated to the domain of irrational, images become, in Mitchell’s words, subaltern, denigrated and feminised. (Mitchell 1996) For Mitchell, this feminisation is not merely about the dominant mode of depiction in art, popular culture and advertising where women are constructed as “image” (Berger 1972) and men as, to use Mulvey’s phrase, bearers of the look, the gaze, but that images “are women” (Mitchell 2005: 35), ascribed with characteristics such as irrationality, naïveté, delusion, immorality, mysteriousness, and danger. The power of photographs – including news photographs – is often perceived as a power of seduction. They are often ascribed the ability to sway public opinion, change the course of foreign policy decisions, outrage entire nations or even end wars. To use by now a somewhat archaic play of words by one of the medium’s practitioners, the business of photography is “emotions, not emulsion”. The other side of this “subaltern” status of photography is that in many media institutions, photographers are still considered to be “second-class citizens in the newsroom” (Hagaman 1998: 4).

The second reason for starting the book on visual framing with a somewhat long reference to the “tyranny of the empty frame” is also linked to the question of representation and the role of photographic images in the social construction of meaning through news. News photographs are of course more than a mere “technical” problem that needs to be solved by insufficiently trained and underpaid alienated newsworkers bound by time pressures of a 24/7 news cycle and “always on” society, operating within increasingly concentrated media markets with declining revenues and audiences. News photographs are essentially about the construction of “the world out there”, of a world beyond our immediate experience which we experience through specialised institutions, such as journalism. They are part of the discursive construction of meaning and partake in the creation of the “image” of the world, which they at the same time construct, narrate and legitimate. Investigation of the visual framing of news should thus be dedicated to the critical investigation of the content of visual representations as well as of the discursive structures and power relations that structure journalistic
mediation of reality. It should thus acknowledge the special way in which images are put to use within journalism but at the same time also account for journalism’s broader investment in vision. The concept of eyewitnessing – either conceived as a role of the reporter, a form of news report, or technology (Zelizer 2007) – is the linchpin of journalism and forms the basis of its professional ideology. Vision is the central medium of journalism and permeates it from the very conceptualisation of professional routines to the popular metaphors used to describe it (e.g. the watchdog role of journalism). As Hartley vividly observed, the journalist is conceived as a “heroic eyewitness, piercing jungly ignorance with a steady eye of a dispassionate observer” (1992: 143) in a project of visualisation of “truth”. One of the central functions of modern journalism is to establish visions of social order and as such it very early joined other modernist institutions and agents of social control, contributing to an on-going articulation of the boundaries of desired social behaviour. As I intend to show in the subsequent chapters of this book, press photography plays a very central role in journalism’s project of “making visible” social reality to media audiences, but also in making media audiences visible to themselves and through that contributes to the integration of audience members into a larger community.

In the West, the development of news media audiences had generally paralleled the gradual establishment of a mass electorate within the framework of the nation-state, interlinking the functioning of the political system and political rights of individuals with public communication. The rise of the media was part of modernity’s broader drive for systematic rational control over the environment, and newspapers quickly became instrumental not only to the functioning of the political system, i.e. the modern state with professionalised institutions and elected public representatives, but also for stabilising the political system within a framework of a nation-state. The press did not only create a community of citizens – the public – capable of articulating public opinion (e.g. Tönnies 1922/1998). By virtue of creating a shared space of public “conversation” on a common topic through a shared language (Tarde 1898/1969), it would also put these public(s) on the political stage “as actors in a national drama” (Chaney 1993: 20; my emphasis). As Anderson influentially suggested, such routine, periodic communication through news media produced a sense of belonging to an imagined community of nation. Communication studies in general have been far more successful in recognising the linkage between political system and communication, between democracy and media, than with acknowledging the link between communication and community or acknowledging that intertwined dimensions of politics and culture within the notion of a community. The link between the two would more often be implied (as e.g. in Habermas’
theory of public sphere) then explicated and built upon – even though in Europe, the modern theory of a sovereign democratic state “presupposes the idea of a ‘national community of fate’ – a community which rightly governs itself and determines its own future” (Held 1989: 236). The political sovereignty was – and in practice mostly still remains – not so much a universal human right but a nationality-based right, linked to the citizenship of a particular nation state, a fact that in 2015 was both visibly challenged (Greek-debt crisis as primacy of economy over civic rights) and reinforced (refugee crisis as primacy of national belonging over humanism) through public communication.

This book will attempt to reconnect the disparate notions of communication, political and cultural/national community through a series of case study analyses of visual framing of news in Slovene media. The goal of the book is therefore not to present a definitive volume on visual framing, a “how-to” book that would fill the gap in the existing literature. Undoubtedly, the gap exists. But as we have been so convincingly and repeatedly warned by a number of prominent framing scholars – framing’s key advantage is that it functions as a “bridging model” for the research of mediated communication which enables the researcher to fruitfully bring together a number of disparate theories (and even paradigms), trying to fill this gap through building a unitary theoretical and methodological frame would be at the same time counterproductive and futile. Instead, what I aim to provide is a theoretically and methodologically founded argument on how framing represents a highly informative theoretical concept that can help us understand both the role of journalism in construction and maintenance of nationally-bound political communities, as well as the central but often overlooked role that images play in this process. Through its declared focus on press photography, it becomes yet another reminder on the necessity of inclusion of the study of visuals into the mainstream of communication research. Despite the steadily rising number of studies that either include or explicitly focus on the visual modality of news, multimodal media research still remains an exception rather than a rule, which stands in sharp contrast to the widely present critique of the perceived power of the image, its contribution to the depolitization of citizens, dumbing-down of media content or outright replacement of “reality” through image-driven simulacra. The book also rallies for the need to recognise the national character of both mediated communication and media scholarship. A number of studies, including the case studies presented in the book, clearly expose the deep embeddedness of journalism in national contexts and point to the fact that it is the local gatekeepers and their cultural frames that define the exact tone of news. The decision to present the visual framing of news through Slovene case studies
was not guided solely by the author’s familiarity to the cultural framework, just as the case studies should not be taken to be mere idiosyncratic examples of Slovene visual framing, cultural curiosities from global journalistic and political periphery. Rather, these case studies represent a localised articulation of global trends and I would argue that the similarities of Slovene cases with other “locally” contextualised studies is much greater that their cultural specificity. These studies presented are important precisely because of their dual narration – because of particularities as well as universalities that they reveal. The decision to publish the book with a “local” university publisher but in a globally accessible language is another practical articulation of the same abstract argument on academic knowledge production. Critical communication studies cannot strive to produce universalist narratives – the study of power can only be relevant if it is local/particular as well as globally relevant/structural at the same time. In a recent interview, John Tagg describes the current trend of transformation of the knowledge production in the field of photography as that of “global localisation” – a work characterised “by localised histories and interventions made around local archives and machineries” which will not remain local, but “pose a global challenge for the rest of us, and we will have to take in and account for these interventions.” (Tagg: 2016: 27) Hopefully, this book will be a small particle of this trajectory.

In trying to understand and critically assess press photography’s role in the (visual) framing of news, we need to start from explaining the role of photography in the process of narration of news. Regardless of the increased investment into the use of photographs in press – evident from the amount of space given to photographs on front pages of daily newspapers or the number of photographs published in online news, or to use a more grim criteria, through the number of professional and citizen photojournalists killed each year – the role of visuals is still primarily to support and give validity to journalistic narrative in written form – or as I will more extensively argue in chapters 4 and 6 – to symbolically synthesise the story. Domination of image over text for the purpose of narration is generally a short-lived aberration from the norm and is characteristic for events of exceptional magnitude and social consequence, such as September 2001 terrorist attacks, or, to offer a more localised example, the 1991 war of Slovene independence (see Figure 2). The reduction to a lower level of cognitive processing – to perceive the image rather than to interpret it within a discourse – is temporary and declines as events “normalise”. During the initial stage of events of the above mentioned type, the act of eyewitnessing is essentially “shared” with an audience, as the failure to provide immediate explanation is transformed into an act of mutual gazing of journalists and audiences at the unexplainable,
Zmagovalci v vojni Živcev

Slovenija, 27. junij 1991

Brezobžiren napad na Slovenijo: mrtvi, spopadi, eksplozije
while in the later stages, in order for a dominant interpretation of events to be crystallised, the primacy of the eyewitnessing act needs to be reclaimed by the journalists and then be offered back to the audiences in a mediated form – through news frames.

While journalism was founded on the notion that knowledge can be accumulated through observation, press photography was founded on an assumption that events are communicable in images and that a cast of specialised professionals can make the world known through images. As professional histories indicate, the marriage of the two at the beginning of 20th century was not an easy match and was met by significant resistance of “word journalists” (e.g. see Becker 2000; Hardt and Brennen 1999; Nerone and Barnhurst 2003; Zelizer 1995). The main site of contestation was the division of labour between description and interpretation and photographic images were assigned the role of the latter for a number of reasons, including the attempts to regain the loss of public trust in the press and popularity of the belief that the medium of photography is a prime vehicle for closing down the openness and disputability of social reality. However, neither the media nor press photographers were fully satisfied with this reduction of photography to mere factual visual description. Although the perceived professional role of press photographers was, and as will be shown in chapter 4, still is that of objective recorders of reality, the media has always demanded also the production of “pictures with impact”. And it very quickly became obvious that the most effective way of communicating the significance of events to readers was by going beyond factual recording and focus on emotional impact and symbolism (cf. Griffin 1999, Huxford 2001), reporting events through a set of repetitive and familiar motifs that visualise pre-existing and culturally shared values, ideas, and beliefs. Throughout the 20th century, a set of fairly standardised visual tropes (metaphors, metonymies), typical motifs, visual repertoires of symbolic gestures, and visual stereotypes emerged that can serve as ready-made frames for interpretation of events. Figure 3 is illustrative example of this. As Michael Griffin claims, news photographs are most powerful when they serve as “ideological memes, transcending the depiction of specific events, times and places to symbolize abstract, mythic concepts such as nationhood, heroism, collective struggle, or selfless sacrifice.” (Griffin 2012: 164) In September this year, we were reminded of the power of such symbolic photographs through a widely publicised image of the body of a 3 year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi that was washed ashore on a beach near Bodrum, Turkey. The tragic image of a drowned child managed

Ukrainija
Med Evropsko unijo in nakovalom

REDIŠČE KIJEVA JE ŽE DRUGI TEDEN DAJALO VTIS
TRDNJAVE MED DVEMA IMPERIJEMA. Na eni strani
Rusija do Vladivostoka, na drugi Evropa do Grenlandije.
Bil je mirz in naletevale so snežnike. Okrog glavnega trga
Majdan Nezaleznosti so se dvigovali zidovi iz deska, paljet,
železnih ograj in klopi iz parkov. Na severnem in južnem
na protiščanega nezgodnega nad Kijev. Leta
2020 naslovi med kmeniško, ki je predhoda
vijal vihod in je potvor sonču. Učinko je
predvajal kule.

Viktor Joštenko je bil med protivodnimi kam-
pogori pobrežje politično univerzitetne zapuščine,
z dialektom, ki je razsežno zelo vplivno. Joštenko pa je moral so stolpis udoma
strukturu predvajati na novo odločitev, na katero je
izgubil. Krajina je takrat bistvena
na dve.

"Kijev je na videti bit. V notranji pa je
polne nevtral. V novo leta je bil v tezavah
zgora. Nekarko ena obzidja stana toliko, kot je
naslednji v desetih mesecih. To je iz Kijeva,
pa vidi celo regijo, kor akčni popolna rez.
Diva rezvija, kjer so bili, verii klo-
na je več aliota.

Videti je bilo politično univerzitet, ki je po-
kezdna parlament. Spomnjen je bil za po-
sho pravikovnih univerzitet. Visoka je, da
je, da se posreduje v poletu, ki se v no-

Lesja Orobčev je rekla, da se je Evropa v po-
škizanah z Jamankovcem esakmoša in poku-
za in politično načelo tretje. Tojo cielo
se po leto se evropski funkcionar paralelje s
predhodnikom države, ki jih je popolno
protestov, kot odredivi, da medovana ne bo

premalo in je še še Raja. Putin. Da gospos je
zik, ki ga Jamankovec zaseme. Slam ti popust
na censo plača in dvor mišljen: "Jamankovec
je dobrim vedel, kaj mu Putin governo."

Med drugimi problemi ima Ukrainija dobrim
pregremit milijard evrov državnega dolga.

Ukrainija je bila sovjetski industrijski baten.
Tudi se do leto 1991, delavi so od avtomoto-
boja do mesterjev za nakup in ležalja, železni
in aluminij sta talila in kovala za sovjetski
bog. En del industrije se vedno delu taka.

Sampq enkrat bo uroten zmajalih in po-

Levo zelo
Silvia Klemenč
 fotografija
to mobilise public attention and at least temporarily managed to reframe the public debate on refugees from what were predominantly security and economy-based frames to a humanitarian one. At the same time, Kurdi’s image also showed that the power of such symbolic images is more likely to stir emotionally-driven responses (charity) than then sustained political action, or trigger frustration if a meaningful political action to influence the outcome of events cannot be taken by individuals (cf. Sontag 2004, Taylor 2000). Within the period of three weeks, Alan Kurdi drowned twice. First in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, then in the wave of metaphors about the “flood of immigrants” that streamed from mainstream and social media alike. The community emerged through mediated communication and begun demarcating itself, demonstrating yet again that identification is easier achieved by evoking the image of otherness rather than difference. In a response to the “tidal wave of refugees”, communities rushed to erect discursive and material boundaries, in the case of Slovenia, visible in the form of over 200 kilometres of razor blade wire fence on the border with Croatia.

For the study of visual framing, it is important to understand that press photography’s emergence as a particular style of visual reporting of news was not spurred by criticality (e.g. watchdog function) but by governmentality. The development of the dominant codes and conventions of the “documentary style” in 1920s and 1930s is, as Tagg emphasises, inseparably tied to the interdependency between a particular model of State, its dominant media and economic mode.

The historical specificity of documentary mode is above all predicated in the new structure of address – a rhetoric of recruitment [...] of subjects as citizens, called to witness, called to reality and coherence, precisely at the time when the established regimes of sense and sociality were profoundly threatened by a crisis that was never solely political or economic. (2008: 125, original emphasis)

What Tagg reminds us of is that documentary photography (and by extension its subgenre of press photography) became an integral part or strategy in the governance of the modern, interventionist state by implicating the individual in the politics of government administration through the act of “dramatization of witness”, calling him or her to duty as a civic subject. To look at documentary-style photographs became an act of bearing witness “to
TEHNIČNE OKVARE HELIKOPTERJEV
IN NENADNIH POTNIKIH V PUŠČAVI


TEHNIKAR JAVLJA, da so območja helikoperjev in sedanjih potnikov v puščavi "nedavno zmanjšali".

TEHNIKAR JAVLJA, da so območja helikoperjev in sedanjih potnikov v puščavi "nedavno zmanjšali".

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the truth of citizenship and to renew again the ethical contract between the citizen and the State as the form of our collective participation in that truth.” (Ibid.: 126) At the same time, the mass communication on which these acts of interpellation depended were “reconfigured to respond to commercial concerns in ways in which economic capital helps shape and reinforce the social and political will of society” (Hardt 2004: 5) under the same ideological umbrella of democratic conventions. Press photography’s institutionalisation and popularisation after the Second World War was built precisely on the perpetuation of this idea of citizen witnessing and underlines many of the most prestigious institutions of the field, such e.g. photographic agency Magnum. Photographic depiction of “the pain of others”, to use the title of Sontag’s influential 2004 essay, was justified precisely on the grounds that the viewer was not an apolitical individual of atomised media audience but just the opposite – a (concerned) citizen of a modern (nation) state.

This notion, or better, an imperative of the pictorial act of bearing witness is the ultimate reason for introducing the book on visual framing through the example of the tyranny of the empty frame. As the case of the two Slovene media outlets and their online news-publishing platforms indicates, the act of pictorial bearing of witness is paramount and can trump the adopted codes and conventions regarding the visualisation of events. To facilitate this, the press has developed a different set of conventions that govern the provision of images, ranging from the number of photographs typically used to visually report a news story, to the methods of the treatment of non-visualised or non-visualisable events. Contrary to the professional saying “no images, no news”, journalism has traditionally solved the dilemma, not by renouncing news, but by (re)producing visual material. Appropriate images would be produced, ranging from drawings and illustrations to the elaborate contemporary computer renderings and animated 3D models. As can be seen from Figure 4, this practice is by no means new, even in days when newspapers would only publish a few images per issue, news that needed to be born witness to would be illustrated through other means. In the absence of quality photographs, print journalism would resort to the use of video or film stills, while TV journalism would resort to the use of still images. The loss of the quality of the image (or of modality in the case of TV news), which is generally highly valued in news production, is sacrificed to provide the interpellation of the audience into eyewitnessing citizens. In cases where no images were produced by professional journalists, amateur-produced visual material would make its way into the news.

Figure 4: Bearing witness to unphotographed events: Operation Eagle Claw – a failed rescue attempt of US hostages held at the US embassy in Teheran. Delo 28 April 1980.